

St. Mary Rehabilitation Working Group

EXHIBIT

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DATE

1/24/11

HB

79

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January 23, 2011

Montana House of Representatives
House Committee on Natural Resources

Re.: Support for HB 79

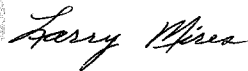
Dear Chairman Hendrick and members of the committee:

My name is Larry Mires and I am the executive director of the St. Mary Rehabilitation Working Group ("SMRWG"). I write on behalf of the SMRWG in support of HB 79, an act to Authorize Statutory Spending Authority for Blackfeet Water Rights Compact Mitigation Account Interest Payments. The SMRWG is made up of 16 volunteer members representing irrigation interests, municipalities, recreation/fisheries groups, economic development entities, and county governments, as well as representatives from the Blackfeet Tribe and the Ft. Belknap Indian Community.

The SMRWG was created in 2003 to craft a workable solution for rehabilitating the St. Mary Facilities before the system suffers catastrophic failure. The St. Mary Facilities are the backbone of the Milk River Project, one of the five original Bureau of Reclamation irrigation projects. The Milk River Project serves over 110,000 irrigated acres of agriculture along Montana's Hi Line. In dry years, nearly 90 percent of the water available to Milk River Project users comes from the St. Mary River, which arises on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. The SMRWG strongly supports the settlement of the Blackfeet Tribe's federal reserved water rights claims embodied in US Senate 3290, as that settlement vindicates the historically neglected water rights of the Blackfeet Tribe while protecting the Milk River Project's vital access to St. Mary River water. Likewise, the SMRWG strongly supports HB 79 and urges the committee to pass HB 79.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,



Larry Mires
Executive Director
St. Mary Rehabilitation Working Group

Members: Lt. Gov. John Bohlinger - Co-chair, Randy Reed - Co-chair, Chinook, Dave Peterson - Havre, Dolores Plumage - County Commissioners, Gary Anderson - Chinook, Wes Pankratz - Glasgow, Bruce Hould - Malta, Marko Manoukian - Malta, Matt McCann - Harlem, Jennifer Brandon - MR Jt. Board, Mike Barthel - Recreation, Paul Tuss - Economic Development, Randy Perez - Ft Belknap, Steven Page - Glasgow, Wade Engstrom - Economic Development, Michael DesRosier - Glacier County, Gerald Lunak - Blackfeet Tribe, Staff: Larry Mires - Executive Director, Pam Lemer - Adm. Assistant

